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ABSTRACT

This presentation gives a general review of the Modern Languages Project and outlines tasks of the working groups during the conference at which the report is presented. Underlying the project is a conviction that the ability to communicate freely with other human beings is a basic human right; therefore, people must be afforded the opportunity to learn the language skills they need to exercise this right. Another important understanding of the project has been the concept of learner autonomy. The general approach is communicative language learning, the principles of which are set forth. A second component has been the specification of objectives consonant with a learner-centered, communicative approach. Two aspects of the project's work on objectives have become widely known, namely the introduction of the notional-functional syllabus and the application of that approach to the definition of a threshold level of language proficiency. It is noted that if the project's decision to give priority to interpersonal communication as a learning objective is adapted by member countries, the implications for teaching and learning are considerable. (AMH)

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CONFERENCE

"ACROSS THE THRESHOLD TOWARDS MULTILINGUAL EUROPE -
VIVRE LE MULTILINGUISME EUROPEEN"

(Strasbourg, 23-26 February 1982)

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS OF THE MODERN LANGUAGES PROJECT AND INTRODUCTION TO THE TASKS AND METHODS OF WORK OF THE CONFERENCE

by

J L M TRIM

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It is a great honour for me today to be privileged to present for your consideration the findings of the Modern Languages Project of the Council of Europe. You have all received and studied the report "Modern Languages 1971-81", in which those findings have been set out by the experts who have been responsible for developing and applying what is now widely known as the Council of Europe Approach. As delegates of member governments of the Council of Europe, you are now invited to evaluate the aims, principles and findings of the report, and to consider recommendations concerning future Council of Europe policy in respect of modern languages. In both these respects we also welcome the views of the many observers present, representing other governments or international non-governmental organisations, or present in their personal capacity as experts whose experience and understanding of the issues to be discussed are respected and valued. We expect that delegates and observers will participate on equal terms in all discussions in the days ahead.

In considering and evaluating the findings of the project, I should like you to bear in mind the words of the great German philologist Hermann Paul when writing about the principles of linguistics almost a century ago. "Some critics", he wrote, "will find them too general, others too elementary. Many would like something more intellectually stimulating. I declare once and for all", he went on " that I am writing only for those who share my conviction that scientific progress comes not through complicated hypotheses, however ingeniously argued, but through simple basic ideas, which are in themselves obvious, but become fruitful only when they are made clear to the consciousness and carried through with strict logical consequence" (einfache Grundgedanken, die an sich evident sind, die aber erst fruchtbar werden, wenn sie zu klarem Bewusstsein gebracht und mit strenger Konsequenz durchgeführt werden).

It is a pleasure to quote a Neogrammarian, in the centenary year of Viëtor's manifesto calling for a revolution in modern language teaching, to salute the memory of such pioneers as Paul and Viëtor, Sweet, Jespersen, Lundgren, Gouin and Passy, and in a later generation Bloomfield and Palmer, upon whose shoulders we are only too well aware of standing. However, it is not only to the giants of the past that we must express our gratitude. The present modern languages programme of the Council of Europe has been able to build upon the achievements of the first 10-year major project of the Council for Cultural Co-operation, and upon the seminal concepts of permanent education and educational technology, which the Council did so much to promote.

Furthermore, if our project has achieved a certain success, it is because of the very hard work of my colleagues in the Project Group and the many collaborators who have contributed to its theoretical and practical development, as well as the selfless dedication of the Secretariat, who have made sure that every idea, every contact was followed up and made fruitful. As they have done so, we have become increasingly conscious of a great rising tide in Europe and further afield, and our final debt of gratitude is owed to the very large numbers of learners, teachers and colleagues in the various educational support services who have been putting ideas into practice and developing them further through action.

This present conference affords us all an opportunity for taking stock, evaluating what has been done, assessing the current position and estimating possible future lines of development for the guidance of the CDCC and the expert group it will set up to conduct the next project in modern languages. The few days ahead of us promise to be of great interest. They may prove to be an important milestone in the evolution of language teaching policy in Europe, since we may find that we have reached the point where the language teaching profession has found a sense of coherence and common purpose and can map out a coherent and purposeful course of action. What is certain is that we shall be very busy during these days. We shall rely heavily on the skill of chairmen and rapporteurs and the self-discipline of participants to work effectively through a programme which is rich enough in content to fill out a considerably larger meeting.

This afternoon, we are asking all working groups, under their first chairmen and their first rapporteurs to consider more general issues, before proceeding tomorrow afternoon, with different chairmen and rapporteurs, to discuss their particular area of special interest. This afternoon, we ask you to consider first the validity and fruitfulness of the general principles which have guided the work: to facilitate the free movement of peoples and ideas; to make it easier for Europeans of different mother tongues to make contact with each other in speech and action, so that they can move about more freely for purposes of work or leisure, to get to know each other better, to work together more effectively, and in these ways to overcome the irrational hostilities and misinterpretations of the past and work towards mutual tolerance, acceptance and respect and a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. Mr Chairman, this is not mere political rhetoric. Each element in this master objective has direct implications for the way in which we learn and teach languages, leading us away from language learning as an intellectual game towards preparation for action. The "communicative approach" is, we believe, a matter for thinking the consequences of this political aim through "mit strenger Konsequenz". We shall also be protected from too shallow an interpretation of communication if we refer particular educational decisions back to this aim and to the closely related concept of human rights. The right to move about freely and to communicate with one's fellow man is a fundamental human right, and free access to the means of doing so is an indispensable prerequisite for exercising that right. But the, the way in which knowledge of other languages is provided within the education system must also respect and promote other rights - those of personal, intellectual and cultural development and social fulfilment. Those who have followed through the development of the project will have seen how the concepts of communication and need have been enriched, and how the concept of autonomy - getting the learner to become increasingly self-reliant and ultimately take charge of his own learning - has grown in importance.

In pursuit of the general aims, the project has organised its work within a systematic framework and devised basic conceptional tools for the planning, construction and conduct of learning programmes closely geared to the needs, motivations and characteristics of the learners, and which enable them so far as possible to steer and control their own progress. The principles of communicative language learning systems development are set out in Chapter 2 of the report by colleagues who have been active in developing them.

Professor Richterich introduces the complex of factors which have to be taken into account when assessing the situation into which a language learning programme has to be introduced. We need to identify and assess the needs of learners - above all their needs as future users of the language, but also their wider educational, personal and social needs - their motivations - what they value, what makes them want to learn (which may, especially at first, be quite distinct from what they need) - their learner-type characteristics (age, background, experience, ability, preferred sensory modality etc) and resources (time, teaching, hard and software etc).

However, even in a learner-centred approach, we cannot confine our attention to the learner, but must also analyse in a similar way the teachers and the institutions in which learners and teachers operate, as well as the society which maintains and encourages them all. Of course, how much of this apparatus is relevant to a particular decision depends on the level at which it is taken. We must not use sledgehammers to crack nuts! However, it will perhaps be agreed that if we have made a proper assessment of what is needed, what is wanted, what is appropriate and what is feasible, we have the basis for informal decision-making. We ask your view, based on experience of the usefulness of the apparatus we have proposed and how it should be further developed.

The second component, one to which we have given perhaps the closest attention, is the specification of communicative objectives. After all, effort devoted to the pursuit of false objectives is wasted, however enthusiastic and efficient in themselves those efforts may be. The more explicit we can be about objectives, the more closely we can interrogate them. If they are found to be needed, wanted, appropriate and feasible, and are accepted by all the partners to learning, then we have a touchstone for the production and evaluation of methods, materials and means of testing.

The project has become most widely known and influential because of two aspects of its work on objectives. First the introduction of the functional-notional approach, and secondly, the application of that approach to the definition of a "threshold level" of language proficiency. These concepts have been too well described by Dr. van Ek and Mr Porcher for me to repeat here what they have written. However, I should like to suggest one or two considerations that you may bear in mind during your discussions. We concentrated attention on the meaning and social function of what people say rather than upon its formal structure to correct an imbalance, not to create a new one. We do not say that grammatical accuracy and logical progression are unimportant but rather that they are not all important or even most important. Once we accept communication as our prime objective, grammar - the way a language is organised - has to be learned as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. The revaluation of language use, learning and teaching implied is far from simple and far from complete. You will have seen from the contributions of van Ek, Porcher and myself that thinking has not ossified. The advent of a functional-notional component in objectives specification is irreversible, but nearer the beginning than the end of the road.

The threshold level was taken as the first priority area of concrete application for our model not in order to promote a single universal objective for language teaching in Europe - what we have said about needs, motivations, characteristics and resources must make it clear that we are in favour of the diversification of objectives - but because the ability to move about freely and independently in another country and to make human contacts at a basic level is the need that more learners share than any other. It is also close to the basic aim of the Council of Europe in promoting the free movement of people and ideas. It has been enormously influential because curriculum planners, course-writers, teachers and learners have found it speaks to their needs, not because of political pressures. Niveau-seuil, Nivel umbral, Kontaktschwelle and Livello soglia have all moved in the direction of providing a codified multidimensional description of the basic resources of a language, upon which course planners can draw, but the original T-level of van Ek, too, has always been used critically as a base de réflection by writers and teachers, who have invariably adapted it to the needs of their own learners as they see them. "Threshold level" focuses on face-to-face interactions. It accords writing a minor role and its cultural component is implicit in the mode of everyday living it presupposes. Now, Mr Chairman, this does not mean that the project is hostile to humanism, to written communication, to cultural values or to the study of literature. What it does challenge, is the set of values, deriving from the ancient Greek view of society and transmitted through classics which sees practical everyday living - culture in the anthropological sense - as inherently banal, trivial educationally worthless, always to be qualified by the adjective "mere"! It considers that the aims, objectives and methods of the classical paradigm are subject to rational analysis and require justification. It does not - I certainly do not - prejudge the outcome. We all have a great deal to learn from a serious debate.

If the decision of the project to give priority to interpersonal communication as a learning objective for the audiences with which it is concerned is accepted, the implications for teaching and learning are considerable, in respect of methodology, materials development and testing. These areas are discussed in the report by Coste, Alexander and Fitzpatrick, and Harrison, Groot and Oskarsson respectively and are taken up in the discussions of a number of the pilot projects in Chapter 3. We shall be particularly interested in your judgement of what has been, and remains to be, accomplished, and whether a firm basis has been laid for further building.

As you will see from page III of Modern Languages 1971-81, Project Group No. 4 was commissioned by the CDCC to produce a report with recommendations on the establishment, in accordance with the general aims of the project, of a European framework within which institutions concerned with the teaching and learning of foreign languages can work together on a continuing basis in developing language learning programmes.

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It is very important, Mr Chairman, for participants in this conference to bear this commission in mind, and what it implies. People often speak and write of the Council of Europe's language programme as though it were the work of a university department, or an institute of language studies, or a similar institution maintained by the Council of Europe. This is not the case. The Council makes available to its project groups, none of whom are full-time employees of the Council, a limited sum of money each year, say between 500,000 and 1 million French francs, for all purposes of the project. Clearly, such resources do not provide for the conduct of basic research or materials development on a large scale. The function of the project is, and must be, to engage institutions which dispose of major resources for teaching and research, to convince them of the mutual benefit to be derived from working together, to construct a common European framework for that free and voluntary co-operation with the approval and support of member governments and, progressively, to build the kind of mutual confidence and trust which responsible, independent agents must have in each other if they are to give up some part of their individual freedom of action to take part in common enterprise.

The framework we seek to establish cannot be narrowly sectarian, theoretically puristic or constraining. There is no way in which co-operation can be or should be imposed upon the unwilling. Of course, in order for it to mean anything, co-operation must be coherent and innovative. We do not need an apparatus of international co-operation to keep things as they are. We cannot work together simply by all going their own way. Our aim is to find a path which we can all go along together, because we can each of us see that it is taking us in the right direction, because we are motivated by a common purpose and following out in our own circumstances a set of common principles we understand and accept.

So, Mr Chairman, I would ask the participants in this conference not to look at what has been done so far as the product of a particular small group of individuals, not to see themselves as a panel of judges come to pronounce a verdict, but to see themselves already as companions. L'Europe, c'est nous! Ask yourself. Can I, my institution, my country, work within this framework? Are these principles and procedures we can use to analyse and tackle our problems in our situation for the benefit of our learners? Of course, we cannot import other people's solutions to their problems in their situations, but can we benefit from their experience? Can we in return contribute our experience to the common pool, to build that unity in diversity that is the essence of Europe?

In this spirit, ladies and gentlemen, we ask you to look through the surface of the product, to the dynamism of the process and the moving spirit - what Humboldt called <u>energeia</u> rather than simply the <u>ergon</u>.

If this conference is to achieve what it is capable of achieving, what members of our profession all over Europe want it to achieve, then we must move as quickly as possible in our working groups to establish that sense of coherence and purpose I have referred to and then go on to plan the practical steps we can take to move forward together over the next few years to produce Europeans who are willing and able to meet each other in the middle of the bridge each builds to each towards a true meeting of minds.

We have too often seen linguistic proficiency as the property of an individual, built up in competition with other students. Our educational structures and systems of examination only too often powerfully reinforce attitudes which do nothing to help the building of bridges. How many classrooms are dominated by fear, a fear which grips teacher and pupils alike, of making mistakes, committing errors, exposing one's fallibility, one's inadequacy? Isn't it best to be cautious, to say as little as possible, to plan everything carefully in advance, to take no risks, whether you are a member of the class, or all the more if you are standing in front of it? But is this what we expect from fellow Europeans who are building their part of the bridge towards us? Will it help us to build our part of the bridge towards them? And doesn't the greater part of the bridge have to be built together not in carefully rehearsed alternating performances, but struggling to make this refractory material of language yield to the drive to share meanings, ideas, feelings, to realise common intentions, to plan and execute common undertakings? If we are working together to communicate, to come to hold things in common, must the burden not be shared, must the stronger, the more experienced, not shoulder the heavier part of that burden and help the weaker, the less experienced, along the way, finding ways round and over the obstacles in the path?

Ladies and gentlemen, fellow linguists, how much do we really know about the processes of face-to-face interaction between native and foreign speakers of a language, or between two non-natives sharing a lingua franca? How do we best invest our limited resources in preparing learners to take part in those interactions? And what about indirect contact through letters, print, films, radio and TV? What is the proper balance between the two in different regional and social contexts? What are the educational consequences, for methods and materials? How far do our teachers understand these issues? How do they see their role? What criteria do they employ? How far are they constrained by existing educational structures? Do they possess the attitudes, knowledge and skills they need to teach for communication? Do they realise the importance of building rather than undermining confidence? Of stimulating and feeding in experience of the language, rather than reducing experience to a starvation diet? Of promoting insight and self-reliance rather than mechanical response and passive acquiescence?

I am afraid Mr Chairman, that there can be rather few areas in which a confident "yes" could be given for all language teachers. Indeed, where a proportion of teachers are aware of the importance of these features, and have the personal equipment to respond, they may not always find the necessary material support, or an administrative framework sympathetic and conducive to putting their ideals into practice.

This, perhaps, will be at the centre of our concern in these next years: to work together to play our part, not an inconsiderable or an unworthy part, in producing a European society composed of self-reliant

individuals, secure in their own identity, but willing and able to reach out from that identity, and with the knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, the identity of the other together with the linguistic equipment to be able to achieve a meeting of minds, of hearts, of wills. We need a European teaching profession dedicated to this aim. We have to equip them with the conceptual and material tools they need, and to create the material, organisational, informational and administrative framework which will support learners and teachers and which will liberate and steer their energies along fruitful and useful paths. In considering this framework we ask you to base your discussion on chapters 4 and 5 of the report.

We ask you to look at three great areas of language learning: the period of compulsory primary and secondary education, in the course of which the broad masses of our populations receive their basic equipment to face the challenge of adult life; adult life itself, in which vocational, social and cultural needs are clarified and developed, and in which new needs emerge unexpectedly, often requiring urgent action; and thirdly, the language problems of migrants and ethnic minority communities. Those of us who attended the Symposium on these problems at Hässelby all remember how the head of the Swedish Board of Education spoke of the ticking time bomb under the advanced Northern industrial countries. Time has passed and the ticking grows louder.

We anticipate that these three areas, already of growing importance within Project No. 4, will be the ones which the CDCC will ask Project No. 12, the next stage in the modern languages programme, to concentrate upon. We are therefore asking the working groups to reach conclusions about the work in these areas already carried out within the project and to consider the suggestions for future policy and action set down in Chapter 6 of the report. Wednesday and Thursday will largely be devoted to these deliberations, which, together with the results of this afternoon's discussions, will put us in a position by Friday morning to finalise the general and specific conclusions and suggestions to be incorporated in the conference report and placed before the CDCC for their consideration.

As I have said, this conference comes at a most important and opportune time, and is capable of setting a realistic and progressive course for language teaching in our countries over the next decade. Let us now settle to some hard work and set that course.